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Secrets Found Blowing in the Wind

Washington is one of the few places in the world where state secrets can be found blowing in the wind—literally.

A reader called us to report seeing highly classified government documents strewn around the playground of an abandoned school in the Northwest section of the city. A visit to the scene confirmed the information: Amid hundreds of papers scattered about were dozens bearing the familiar red stamps at top and bottom: top secret, secret and confidential.

Fortunately, the Playground Papers were somewhat dated, ranging from 1948 to 1962. But portions of them, at least, would undoubtedly be denied to anyone seeking them under the Freedom of Information Act. And under the rules as interpreted by the Reagan administration, prying the documents loose would probably entail months or years of delays.

Though no self-respecting spy would pay a ruble for the Playground Papers, they do provide a fascinating inside view of history in the making—and some thoughts that are relevant for U.S. policy-makers today.

They were the work of a distinguished American diplomat, the late G. Lewis Jones Jr., whose Foreign Service career as a Middle Eastern expert led to his appointment as director of the State Department's office dealing with the region. He was also the first U.S. ambassador to Tunisia.

As nearly as we can figure it, Jones had taken classified documents home with him and eventually put them in a file cabinet with personal effects and stored them in a warehouse near the playground.

Thieves broke into the warehouse, carted off the file cabinet, looted it of valuables and left the secrets behind.

The oldest document we found was dated August 1948 and was a classified analysis titled "Reassessment of American Policy in the Middle East." It confirms many critics' long-held suspicion that the State Department was heavily laden with what Jones decried as "Arab-lovers such as myself" among career Foreign Service officers. He knew "the State Department crowd fairly well . . .," he wrote. "To a large degree in the past, many of them have shared my thinking."

But Jones was not blind to the Arab leaders' faults. "I have felt a keen sense of personal shame with regard to various phases of [pro-Israeli] U.S. policy in Palestine," he wrote. "However, I must admit that the Arab performance has been so bad that it begins to make the pro-Zionist course of the U.S. government in recent years appear much more realistic and logical than the framers of U.S. policy probably had in mind."

Jones was appalled by the Arab nations' "pathetic performance" during the first war against Israel, and the "series of displays of disunity and ineptitude . . . produced in recent weeks."

As for the "Arab awakening" about which he and his friends had "talked glibly" for years, Jones observed bitterly: "There has not been an Arab awakening: the Arabs merely turned over in their deep sleep."

The "Arab awakening" of G. Lewis Jones Jr. was just one subject of historical interest addressed in the Playground Papers. More later.